



DINIZULU AND HIS AFRICAN DANCERS, DRUMMERS AND SINGERS

A Study Guide For Teachers



Tyically, when people step out on the dance floor they do specific dances that are or were popular at a given time, or sometimes they just "do their own thing." Whichever it is, this kind of popular dancing is usually treated as a way of having fun and releasing energy, and not as having any deeper meaning.

This is not the case with traditional ethnic dances. In countries all around the world, traditional ethnic dances have a definite purpose and meaning, and are performed in connection with religious ceremonies and other events in the life of a given group of people such as the end of a war, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one.

One place that is rich with a variety of traditional dances is the continent of Africa. And one group that educates people about this feature of African culture is Dinizulu and his African Dancers, Drummers and Singers. This dance company is based in Queens, New York and has performed at schools, universities, theatres and auditoriums around the world.

The executive director and choreographer is Nana Yao Opare Dinizulu who started the dance company in 1945 in order to, as senior dancer Okomfo Nyo explains, "disseminate information [about Africa] through dance, music, and historical narration." Through these performances people of African descent come to

understand better and take pride in their heritage and other people come to respect and appreciate the richness of African culture.

Dinizulu and his African Dancers, Drummers and Singers perform a variety of dances, including: "Bamaya" (bah MAH ya), a celebration dance from north Ghana; "From" (frohm), performed by men in honor of their king, and also from Ghana; "Ijo Agbara" (EE jo AG bah rah) from Nigeria which is a challenge dance done by women; and a South African miners' dance, "Gumboot."

In their dancing, as Okomfo Nyo puts it, the dancers are "talking with their bodies." This body language

includes stamping of feet, clapping of hands, and the movement of other parts of the body. The costumes also tell part of the story, and include clothing made of colorful African cotton prints, or animal furs and skins, as well as ankle bells, feathers for the waist and head, and shields and spears.

The dances performed by Dinizulu and his African Dancers, Drummers and Singers also involve the singing of traditional African songs and very powerful and stirring music. The musical instruments include a variety of drums made of wood and animal skins such as the warriors' drum, Asafo (ah SAH fow) which is slung over the

shoulder and played with hands or sticks; Donno (Doh NO) which is shaped like an hourglass; and the Gome (go MAY), a square drum that the musician sits on top of and plays with his hands and feet. Two other instruments are the Mbira (em BEER a) made out of strips of metal and also known as a thumb piano; and the Akasa (ah KAH sah), an instrument which is made from a gourd with beads strung around it.

Finally, a very important feature of the performances of Dinizulu and his African Dancers, Drummers, and Singers is that they include a narrator who explains the meaning of the dances and provides information on their origins.

BEFORE THE PERFORMANCE

Explain to your students that Dinizulu and his African Dancers, Drummers and Singers is a dance company based in Queens, New York that travels around the country and the world to perform traditional African dance.

Explain that in doing this the dance company educates people about one aspect of African culture.

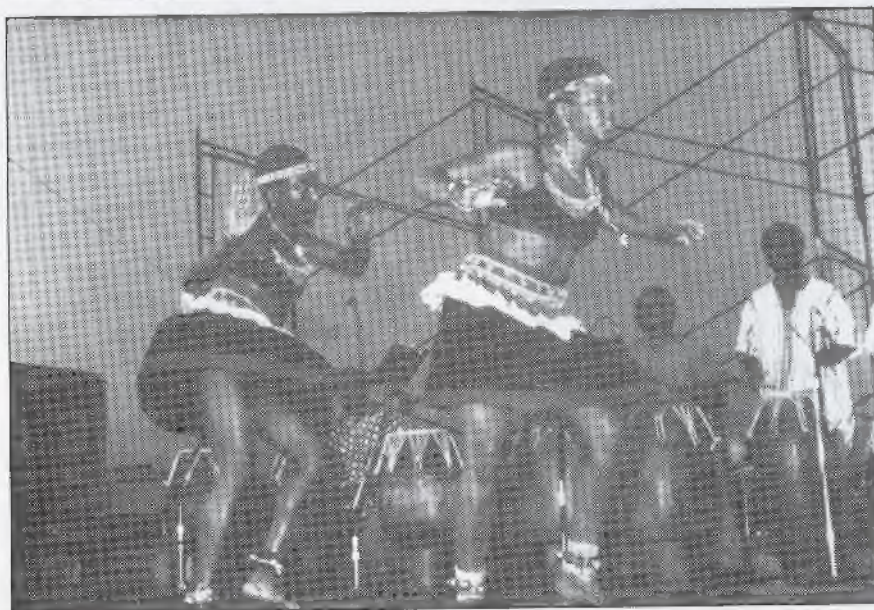
Explain that like other traditional ethnic dances, African dances are connected with specific customs and events in the life of a group of people.

AFTER THE PERFORMANCE

Make a world map available to the class. Write down the names of the dances performed and locate the country from which each dance originates, marking it with a colorful marker. Do the same with the United States and then attach pieces of string from the African countries to the United States to show students the distance the dances have traveled.

Ask your students the following questions:

1. What were the different dances about?
2. Which dance(s) did you like the most and why?
3. What part of the performances did you like the most and why? The music? The singing? The movements? The costumes?
4. Why was it important to have a narrator?



NEW WORDS

AKASA — An instrument which is made from a gourd with beads strung around it.

ASAFO — A warriors' drum which is slung over the shoulder and played with the hands or sticks.

CEREMONY — A set of formal acts for a particular occasion or event.

CHOREOGRAPHER — A person who designs or plans the movements of a dance.

COMPANY — An organized group of dancers, singers, actors, or other performing artists.

DONNO — A drum shaped like an hourglass that is held under the armpit and played with a curved wooden stick.

ETHNIC — Having to do with a group of people sharing a common and distinct culture, religion, language.

GOME — A square drum that is played with the hands and feet.

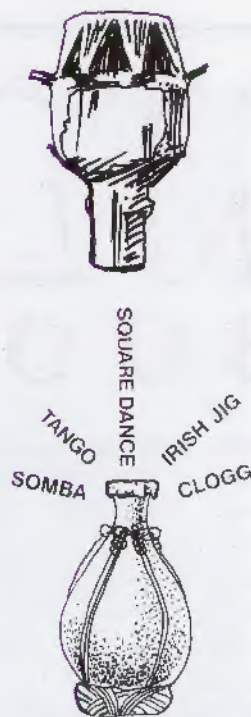
MBIRA — A hand piano made of wood and strips of metal that is played with the thumbs.

NARRATOR — A person who tells a story.

TRADITIONAL — Of or pertaining to a custom or belief that is handed down from one generation to another.



FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES



1. Have your students make up a group story about a happy or sad event. Then have them create a dance that will tell the story. Also, make a variety of musical instruments available for making music and sounds to go with the dance.

2. Make available to your students pictures and information on other traditional ethnic dances and discuss with them the differences and similarities among these dances and traditional African dances.

3. Have each student do research on the country from which their favorite African dance originated and prepare an oral report for an upcoming session.



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EDUCATION PROJECT/ POST TEST

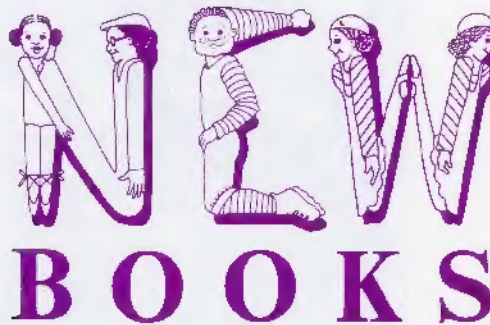
Have your students write their answers to the following questions at the completion of Dinizulu and his African Dancers, Drummers and Singers Education Project to measure their knowledge of the group's presentation.



1. Who are Dinizulu And His African Dancers, Drummers and Singers, where are they from and what do they do?
2. What is traditional African dance?
3. What are the major features of the performances you saw?

4. From what countries did the dances you saw originate?
5. Name two of the dances you saw performed and describe what they were about.

6. Name and describe two of the musical instruments you saw and heard in the performance.
7. How is popular dancing different from traditional African dance?
8. How has your knowledge about African dance affected your thoughts about dancing in general?
9. Why is it important for people of African descent to know about African dance?
10. Why is it important for people who are not of African descent to know about traditional African dance?



The following books may be helpful resources:

- African Art in Motion* by Robert Thompson, University of California Press (1974)
- African History and Culture* edited by R. Olaniyan, Longman Trade (1982)
- African Mythology* by Geoffrey Parrinder, Peter Bedricks Books (1986)

African Rhythm and African Sensibility by John M. Chernoff, University of Chicago Press (1980)

A History of West Africa: An Introductory Survey by J. D. Fage, Cambridge University Press (1969)

Moving with the Face of the Devil; Art and Politics in Urban West Africa, by John W. Nunley, University of Illinois Press (1987)

The Africans by Ali A. Mazrui, Little, Brown and Company (1986)

World History of the Dance by Curt Sachs, W. W. Norton & Co. (1963)

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